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ABSTRACT

The role of test scores used as a district monitoring device by boards of education is discussed. It is suggested that board members insist on inservice education to become knowledgeable in using test scores as curriculum feedback, to understand what is being tested, and to understand test results. Concepts to be covered include: (1) meaning of percentiles; (2) purpose of using specific tests; (3) description of each test; (4) accuracy of test scores; (5) causes for low scores and high grades; (6) causes for high scores and low grades; (7) causes for variations in subtest scores; (8) relationship of ability tests to achievement scores; (9) distinction between ability and achievement; and (10) how parents can improve ability/achievement. Assessment of an educational program is discussed with the issue of accountability. Before releasing test scores, board members should: (1) determine objectives of sharing test scores; (2) disseminate test information to the media; (3) announce type, time, what tests measure, and results; (4) translate results for parents; (5) explain building scores to parents and community; (6) use criterion-referenced and norm-referenced tests in combination to measure district achievement; and (7) insist that cognitive ability tests be tied to achievement tests. The use of test items, as well as criterion-referenced and norm-referenced tests, are discussed. (PN)

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WHAT BOARDS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT STANDARDIZED TESTING

As Board Members, we have certain self-perceptions drawn from state laws, community expectations and our image of ourselves as community leaders. Often, we see ourselves as policy setters, guardians of the public's money. We deal very comfortably with tangible objects and concrete results - things like roofs, blacktop, school bus maintenance - but Boards generally are uncomfortable with the most important area of their responsibility - curriculum. We all want a quality return for tax dollars. So program plans, learning objectives, textbook selection are the items for our educational experts, those members of our staff we hire to deal with this area. I believe that this is your most important responsibility - the ultimate reason for Boards of Education to exist. What frankly are the public monies for? To teach children.

First, you must insist on inservice and become knowledgeable in curriculum - the how and why and what of education. Then, you will be able to understand what is being tested, and finally to understand test results.

As laymen generally not knowledgeable about program, curriculum and textbooks, Boards view test scores as a means to "see how we're doing." It may, in fact, be the sole monitoring device of the Board.

And what an emotional issue it is! Reviewing test scores can be satisfying as well as threatening. It affects every aspect of our community: the Board, the administration, the teachers, the parents, the children and the non-users of our schools who pay taxes. If we are going to build

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long range support of public schools, we must consider the effects of curriculum and testing on every level of our school community.

Let's start with the Board of Education. It is the annual examination of test scores at your Board meeting. You're doing this in public, of course. And you're feeling slightly uneasy. The week before, when your Board packet arrived, you were confronted with pages of numbers and graphs. Just what does it all mean?

You should first know what type of tests you are using. Are they norm referenced or criterion referenced? Do they measure achievement, ability, or attitude?

Norm referenced tests provide Boards with a broad overview of perhaps the achievement or the ability or the attitude of their students based on national samples. There exists some problems with the use of these tests if you ask for more information than these test results can provide. They do not tell you specifically what your children don't know. Norm referenced tests do not cover all the objectives you teach. Test questions are chosen from broad objectives and are limited in the number of questions that can be asked. But even though these tests identify some areas of instruction but not all - because all areas are not covered - we should not stop using the information they generate. Consider having an item analysis done so you know how many children got each test question right - and what areas were tested. Did a number of math questions concern metrics and your district doesn't stress metrics in that grade? Does that account for a lower score in one area?

The second type of test is criterion reference. We have several in our district - math, social studies. The test specifically tests mastery of objectives. In our social studies criterion referenced tests, we have 33 objectives with 3 test questions for each objective. Mastery is accomplished

if 2 of the 3 test questions are answered correctly. This type of test can tell you specifically what objectives the children know or don't know, thus, assisting in future instruction. They do not, however, tell you where your children stand in relation to other students nationwide.

Information from tests are very specific. You must look at that score not alone, but in the context of other scores - similar to the way parents view the range of their children's scores. It is important to keep your perspectives. Take a view of the district scores in view of the total district - not just as isolated scores. You must look at other information too, for example: the ability of your students. One set of information must confirm another. In other words, how do the scores of achievement relate to the ability of your students? Try to get objective information. Avoid personal opinions. Forget personalities. Don't make hasty decisions based on one year's test scores. Look at fulfilling your short and long range objectives and goals.

In preparing this speech, I asked my Superintendent, Dr. Bill Kritzmire, how test scores affect administrators. Specifically, I asked, "Bill, if test scores go down, what is the reaction of administrators?" He answered, "They sweat!"

Whether or not test scores go up or down or remain the same, administration should item reference the test questions as I mentioned earlier to identify strengths and weaknesses. Test items can and should be traced to your curriculum. Is this concept in our curriculum? Where? If not, should it be added? The purpose of testing and evaluation is to provide continuing feedback into the larger question of curriculum development and educational policy. Alternatives and recommendations should be forthcoming.

Next, let's consider standardized tests and the teachers. He or she is your key to curriculum taught, tests administered, scores resulting

and, very importantly, your bridge to the parents in interpreting the results. Some teachers fear tests. They are afraid that the test questions are not appropriate to what they've taught. They wonder if they are required to teach the test. They fear having their evaluation based on test results. They worry about the ability of their class year to year in situations such as I have described. Boards must be careful not to evaluate teachers or buildings on the basis of tests alone or they will find their community doing the same. To avoid some of the problems I have mentioned, we have scheduled the majority of testing in September. Thus, test results become teaching and diagnostic tools.

There is only one question that parents have - "How is my child doing?" We plan to share specific test scores of each child with his/her parents. Because tests are administered in September, the results will be available this year for the first parent-teacher conference. Our computer will prepare a narrative and chart for each child, outlining what tests the child has taken, how his cognitive ability score places him nationwide and where he scored nationwide in spelling, language mechanics, reference skills, reading comprehension, math computation and application, reading vocabulary and language expression. His/her strong and weak areas will be listed and graphed. We want to personalize the results of a very impersonal testing session. In order to do that, teachers must be prepared to share information and answer questions.

Inservice is in order. This can be accomplished through after-school building meetings, Institute Days or workshops for credit.

Concepts to be covered include:

1. Meaning of percentiles
2. Purpose of using specific tests
3. Description of each test
4. Accuracy of test scores
5. Causes for low scores and high grades
6. Causes for high scores and low grades
7. Causes for variations in subtest scores
8. Relationship of ability tests to achievement scores
9. Distinction between ability and achievement
10. How can parents improve ability/achievement

Test scores can be reported and left to sit for a year until the next batch of scores come in. They can be used strictly for comparison, if you wish.

On the other hand, they can be used as a diagnostic tool to help the district and individual teacher plan to meet the students' needs. They can be used to select children for special programs, classroom assignments, and sub-groups within the classroom. You can rank incoming 7th graders to your junior highs in areas of ability, math and reading scores for course tracking. You can do building and individual test score expectancy analysis prior to tests to generate expected scores. When we compare them with the actually attained scores, we can spot problem areas. Children can not only be underachievers, but overachievers.

For local school district releasing test scores can be a no-win situation no matter how the scores come out. If the scores are low, the community reaction is predictable - "What's wrong?" If they are high, the

immediate question may be "How come they're not higher?" In other words, it can be risky to release test scores without first preparing the community.

Assessment of your educational program is intertwined with the issue of accountability - to the users and the non-users of the system.

In reporting test scores to the community, we must remember all taxpayers, even those who have no family member in our schools. Any crisis or praise affects them. They are just as concerned as we are over the image of the district. They want us to produce products that read, write, and compute well. They may even feel that their property values are affected.

Different audiences have different informational needs. They must be identified and accommodated.

Determine the objective of sharing test scores before designing communication activities. Effective dissemination requires adequate resources: time, material, people and you guessed it - money. You must find the means to answer the question for your community - "How is my tax dollar doing?"

Work with the media. Give them everything you have. Don't hide anything. They'll probably find out anyway and you'll have real problems. Prepare charts and tables for their use - statistics in an easily understood format - so they can adequately explain test results to their audience.

Meet with groups of citizens, PTA, key opinion leaders, local organizations to explain to them what type of tests are used, what time of the year they are administered, what the tests measure and what the results are.

Make sure your staff is prepared to explain to parents how their child is doing. Can they translate norm referenced test results into usable information for the parent, the child, the community?

Are your principals prepared to explain building scores to the

parents and community? Information is received most favorably when it comes voluntarily from the school, not in response to an angry protest.

As Board members,use criterion reference and norm reference tests in combination to measure your district. And know what it is that you want to measure!

Insist that cognitive ability tests be tied to achievement tests. Achievement can be raised in spite of low cognitive ability scores through better teaching, curriculum, and inservice.

There is a publication from the National School Public Relations Association titled Releasing Test Scores that ends with the following statement:

"One purpose of any educational accountability program should be to help the schools become more responsive to the needs of their publics and this is impossible unless those publics know and understand, how the entire education "family" is working to improve education. The component of accountability known as (testing) assessment is vital to both educational and public understanding.

When those involved with (testing) assessment programs realize that (test results) assessment dissemination can be a cornerstone to building understanding, they will have taken a large step along the road to the ultimate objective - "doing a better job of helping kids learn."